

Naturalism Undone

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Different Naturalisms

Webster's New International Dictionary (1923)

4. a *The theory that art or literature should conform to nature; realism; also, the quality, rendering, or expression of art or literature executed according to this theory. b* *Specif., the principles and characteristics professed or represented by a 19th-century school of realistic writers, notably by Zola and Maupassant, who aimed to give a literal transcription of reality, and laid special stress on the analytic study of character, and on the scientific and experimental nature of their observation of life. Cf. REALISM.*

College Edition of the Random House Dictionary of the English Language (1968)

1. *Literature, a technique reflecting a deterministic view of human nature and attempting a nonidealistic, detailed, quasi-scientific observation of events. 2. a technique of rendering an artistic subject so as to reproduce its natural appearance in detail. 3. the theory of literary or artistic naturalism. 4. action arising from or based on natural instincts and desires alone.*

The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism (1987)

One could, perhaps, best describe naturalism as the working-out of a set of conflicts between pretty things and curious ones, material and representation, hard money and soft, beast and soul. But this doesn't mean that the naturalist writer is someone who has chosen the beastly side of these dichotomies (the side literary history ordinarily associates with naturalism) or even that he is someone who has chosen with any consistency either side. The consistency—indeed, the identity—of naturalism resides in the logics and in their antithetical relation to one another, not necessarily in any individual, any text, or even any single sentence.

The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism
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How, in the beginning, in this country, plentiful silver and scarce gold coexisted as money. How, during the Civil War, by fiat, Abraham Lincoln added paper money (greenbacks) to the currency, a ton of it, 450 million unsecured dollars. How everyone prospered and great things were done—silver, gold, and paper freely circulating. How, after the Civil War, the existing greenbacks were gradually withdrawn from circulation, quietly retired, as it were, and no new ones printed. How, in 1873, the gold interest got Congress to demonetize silver and make gold the only money in the country. How it slipped that bill (the Coinage Act of 1873) past poor old simple U. S. Grant, the sitting President, who afterward said he had no idea of it and would not have signed the bill if he had known that it demonetized silver. How, in the consequent long depression, prices falling, falling, to their pre-Civil War level, money tight, tighter, certain magnates, John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, Charles Pillsbury, George Westinghouse, consolidated their respective empires, oil, steel, milling, manufacture. How high the interest rates were, in that duration, good for lenders, bad for borrowers. How hard the times were, businesses closed, companies failed, people out of work, farmers everywhere struggling, working harder, producing more, for less and less, many losing their farms. How, indeed, “the crime of ‘73” was actual, the imposition of the gold standard an originary event, a sudden concentration of wealth and power, something like a coup d’état. How, behind the text of the 1873 bill—the one U. S. Grant could not read—manifest, an outrageous strength with an inscrutable malice sinewing it, the Bank of England. How, in the luster of this epic utterance: “You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns, you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold,” a sinister figure might be seen.

All this disappears in Walter Benn Michaels’s *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism*, the truths of the Populist/Progressive story, and its big basic fact, that radical contraction of the money supply. All this (the complexity of that which is Populist/Progressive) goes into a seemingly sideless (apolitical, nonideological) critical language in the book, undergoes abstraction, becomes the silver interest, is set opposite to, made the equivalent of, the gold interest. Populist/Progressive and Conservative/Republican share the same metallist supposition, the same fundamental belief structure, so their difference, their opposition, in *The Gold Standard* is problematic. As for that big Populist/Progressive fact, the post-1873 contraction of

the money supply, it is, in the texts Michaels puts before us, the “free-silver specter of a contracting currency” (150), or the “fantasy of money’s disappearance” (175). We might think Frank Norris’s *McTeague* a para-Populist novel, one that invokes the “free-silver specter of a contracting currency” because it loses all that gold (Trina’s hoarded five thousand dollars) in the desert, but to do so, Michaels argues, “to read *McTeague* as a silver tract would be finally to miss the point of gold and silver’s shared fantasy, as ‘real’ or ‘primary’ money” (150). A qualification promptly follows this statement of equivalence. Indeed, one might well ponder these terms, silver interest, gold interest, consider how packed they are with referents, with diverse persons, places, policies, with impoverished farmers and enriched bankers, and feel uneasy about this stated equivalence. Michaels had this qualm. “Stressing the importance of this fantasy,” he reminds us, “I don’t mean to slight the difference between the gold and silver interests: socially, politically, even economically, they were substantial. Rather, it is just these differences that make the shared commitment to precious metals so striking. Neither the goldbug fear of inflation nor the free-silver desire for it can quite explain the nearly unanimous hostility to fiat money, since, of course, the essence of legal tender is that its supply can be controlled by the government that issues it to produce either of these effects” (150–51). Difference is there, briefly, social, political, economic, and then not there. William Jennings Bryan, J. P. Morgan, both were metallic materialists, believed logocentrically in metal’s intrinsic value, that is the striking thing about them, their ontological complicity.

I linger over this passage, over these abstractions—silver interest, gold interest—and pick at the argument. Free-silver desire (that which is Populist/Progressive), I think, is not nearly unanimously hostile to fiat money. A lot of free-silver desire also wanted paper money, a regulated issue of it, a seasonal flow of it, as it were. Almost all the Populist/Progressive platforms declare for paper money. I do not like this lumping together, this confusion, of silver interest (Populist/Progressive) and gold interest (Conservative/Republican). I look to recover their difference, to restate their opposition. In the *Book of Rejoinders*, under “Property, the Common Term,” Abraham Lincoln says to Stephen Douglas: “Inasmuch as you do not object to my taking my hog to Nebraska, therefore I must not object to you taking your slave. Now, I admit this is perfectly logical, if there is no difference between hogs and negroes.”

Of course a certain interpretation is at work in Michaels’s book—logical, syllogistic, vigilant, marking its negatives, mark-

ing its limitations. Not, not, not, only, only, only. That is the construction of the sentence in *The Gold Standard*, the edge of its analysis. What it puts out, a side to stand on, is not easily recovered, logically speaking. I do not myself believe in the gold standard. Fiat money is all there is, now. Yet I cling, illogically, I suppose, to a certain anticapitalism, even though I recognize I am the creature of a capitalist economy, that I find my subjectivity (postpopulist) in it. That is the irreducible core of my response to this study, to its disinterested reading of the naturalist text, its abstraction of the forces at play in the late nineteenth-century economy. There is something wrong with its statement, its voice, and as it is expressed, I hear, uncannily, somewhere, far from Michaels's intention, yet there, the voice of Ole Massa, of Harriet Beecher Stowe's Augustine St. Clare, of the late nineteenth-century capitalist, that voice sum-totaling, suavely advising acceptance: "It thus seems wrong to think of the culture you live in as the object of your affections: you don't like it or dislike it, you exist in it, and the things you like and dislike exist in it too" (18). I have trouble with this, and with its address, "you."

And then there is this passage, peremptorily logical: "The subject of naturalism, however—at least as I have depicted him here—is typically unable to keep his beliefs lined up with his interests for more than two or three pages at a time, a failure that stems not from inadequate powers of concentration but from the fact that his identity as a subject consists only in beliefs and desires made available by the naturalist logic—which is not produced by the naturalist subject but rather is the condition of his existence" (177). He doesn't grasp, this poor subject, the *that which* which enables his discourse, doesn't see it. Michaels cites Foucault: "People know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what what they do does" (179). Naturalist writing, especially Norris's kind, polemical, personifying, everywhere pathetically fallacious, is therefore always contradictory, inconsistent. Each text, for all its protestation, inexorably stages the drama of its co-optation. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's angry scratchy novella, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Michaels argues, because it wants the right to produce, to enter the market, is more "an endorsement of consumer capitalism than a critique of it" (17). *Sister Carrie*, for all its compassion, its class pitying, sum total, similarly constitutes "an unequivocal endorsement" of the "unrestrained capitalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" (35). In Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, Lily Bart's seeming "distaste for the commerce of Wall Street" effectively reveals

"her complete commitment to the practices of speculation" (228). Literary naturalism did not see that "the logic of naturalism served the interests not of any individual or any group of individuals but of the money economy itself" (178), and therefore fell into error, was illogical.

There is no such mistake in *The Gold Standard*, no standardization, no privileging of sides, of interests. Can an economy, Michaels asks midway through, even have "interests"? "Individuals obviously can, classes can, but insofar as an economy is neither an individual nor a class, it is hard to see how it can be said to have interests." True enough, syllogistically speaking. "The whole point of the analysis I have attempted here," Michaels reminds us, "has been, by subverting the primacy of the subject in literary history, to subvert also the primacy of interest" (178). That is the project. And it seems to me that it is immediately confounded, subverted, since it is so thoroughly class interested, so classist. It appropriates the buzz word, "subvert," but what it does, this project, is empty ideological significance from the text, empty ideological significance from the economic debate, everywhere disconnect belief and interest, neutralize difference. It goes constantly into such curious phrasing: "An economy is made up of what people do, and what people do is a function of, among other things, what they want; but what the economy does may not represent either what people do or what they want. It is, one might say, made up of people, and it acts like a person; but the person it acts like is not the people it is made up of" (178). To discover this, the mystery of the economy, the impossibility of any effective understanding, what knowledge or set of beliefs must be subverted? The economy, also called the money economy, the bourgeois economy, consumer capitalism, unrestrained capitalism, and desire (feminine), excess, is indeed the master trope in *The Gold Standard*, generative. There is no base but this one, and it cannot be personified, cannot be attributed, does not have interests.

In *The Capitalist World-Economy* Immanuel Wallerstein writes: "There was a before (and an outside); there will be an after. What lies between and within is capitalism" (273). Even "those states ideologically committed to socialism" exist in it, as kinds of state capitalism. Our *longue durée*, since the sixteenth century. Wallerstein's textual analysis often works like Michaels's, to discomfit the avowed, to trip up ideology. As he writes about *Time on the Cross*, Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman, "avowed liberals, write what is to my mind one of the strongest politico-moral justifications for the theories of Karl

Marx since Engels's *Condition of the Working Classes in England*." Eugene Genovese, "an avowed Marxist, might be said to make a case for conservative (idealist) theories about the ways in which political and cultural institutions tend to explain the largest part of historical reality" (214). Yet Wallerstein extends the proviso, has not completely disavowed a certain interest. We scrutinize the capitalist world economy, recognize its fundamental political reality, class struggle, examine its "evolving pattern," so that "we may come closer to understanding the social reality of the capitalist world-system of which we are a part, the better and the faster to transform it" (65). He still reads, provocatively, Mao on class conflict in socialist countries. And he is very good at describing that which is bourgeois, the process, from an irony that is effectively anticapitalist. How does one become a bourgeois, remain a bourgeois, cease being a bourgeois? Achievement in the market, Wallerstein tells us. But how does one get into the market? "There is the Horatio Alger model: differentiation out of the working class by dint of extra effort. (This is remarkably similar to Marx's 'truly revolutionary' road from feudalism to capitalism.) There is the Oliver Twist model: cooption because of talent. There is the Horace Mann model: demonstration of potential via performance in formal education" (286–87). Most bourgeois are already there, players in the market, by virtue of inheritance. "Access to the swimming pool is unequal and sometimes capricious," Wallerstein reminds us, and "the crucial question is: can a given individual (or firm) swim?" Being a bourgeois is therefore not easy. It "requires skills not everyone has: shrewdness, hardness, diligence." One of the big problems of present-day capitalism, Wallerstein observes, is the rising price of bourgeois co-optation. The Horatio Algers, the Oliver Twists, the Horace Manns, these constitute a cadre "(the technicians, the professionals, the managers)" sufficiently empowered "to impose their demands on the legal owners of economic firms."

Wallerstein's post-Marxist sociology, with its longtime, immense, inescapable, three-tiered capitalism (core, semiperiphery, periphery), comes constantly to mind as I read Michaels's literary history. Everyone is in the market, is in some relation to it, Swede, Bulgar, Zambian. "There can be no question, then, of the self entering into exchange"; Michaels writes, "exchange is the condition of its existence. Producer and consumer, buyer and seller, the narrator of *The Yellow Wallpaper* need not leave her nursery to follow the other creeping women out into the market; her nursery is already the market." So it is that the narrator's "nervous breakdown," because self-producing,

"marks for Gilman the triumphant omnipresence of market relations" (13). Liberation is not ever out of the grip of its logic. "Even Bartleby-like refusals of the world," Michaels points out, "remain inextricably linked to it," can be seen to count as the "purest of commitments to laissez-faire, the freedom in contract to do as one likes" (18–19). No escape from Wall Street, such is the writing on the wall in *The Yellow Wallpaper*.

What, then, is seen as antisystemic in Michaels, as anti-capitalist? There is a kind of Marxist observance in Wallerstein's *The Capitalist World-Economy* that looks past the present totality of capitalism to a forthcoming mode of socialist production. If its immediate project: "redoing our historical narratives, accumulating new world-systemic quantitative data (almost from scratch), and above all reviewing and refining our conceptual baggage" (136), is not all that heroic, alas, there is nonetheless, as we have seen, the anticapitalist cut of a certain irony in Wallerstein's analysis, the clearance of that negative. Michaels's irony cuts another way. What is anticapitalist in the naturalist text, Michaels tells us, is the *that which* William Dean Howells brings to *The Rise of Silas Lapham*: fear of desire, dread of the market, disgust at excess. It looks, this critical practice, to the autarkic Jeffersonian village, looks to the locality of Lapham's first paint business, to the simplicity of that life, for its evaluative terms. Dreiser gets just this far out in his effort to be dialectical in *Sister Carrie*; he gets to the Howellsian position. The *raisonneur* in *Sister Carrie* is plucky Bob Ames, an electrical engineer from Indianapolis, from Howells's Midwest, the only man in the novel who (because he occupies the Howellsian position) can take no definite interest in Carrie's charm. Michaels defines the Howellsian position early, shows us how it operates in *Sister Carrie*, and then comes back to it in his final discussion of *The House of Mirth* where it reappears as the site of Lawrence Selden's "republic of the spirit." What is therefore substantively anticapitalist in these two strong naturalist texts is homegrown and crumbly. If Ames implicitly recalls Howells, Selden, it might be said, obscurely invokes Thoreau. To get into Selden's imagined republic, where most citizens, he confesses, "are celibate," one has to get out of the market, one has to not want things. Truly, no critical assistance there for Carrie Madenda and Lily Bart, who need ideological help badly, and, since contemporary left-liberal criticism (T. J. Jackson Lears, Ann Douglas, Alan Trachtenberg) simply repeats the "genteel/Progressive" error, the Amesian/Seldenian critique of consumer capitalism, so Michaels argues, no help here for us, we who are driven by the engine of the capitalist world economy.

And yet, for all this—the suspect sidelessness of this book's disinterested stance, the easy abstraction of difference in its historical reference, the often tiresome turning of its logical screw—there is here a significant rereading of the principal fiction in American literary naturalism. Michaels confronts the pieties of the general reading of the naturalist text, this prior reading (Larzer Ziff, Ellen Moers, Donald Pizer) which seems curiously to have remained in place. He exposes the essentialism and bafflement of naturalist writing. His Dreiser recollects Howells, anticipates F. Scott Fitzgerald, is indeed this transition in American literature. The only text that interests the ruined dying old Hurstwood, Michaels observes, is the newspaper, the “paradigmatic realist text.” Where is wisdom in *Sister Carrie*? If we know who speaks for Hurstwood and Ames, who speaks for Carrie, for desire?

There is, in effect, a lot going on in this study, the big project of a revisionary reading of American literary naturalism, and little projects, too.

Michaels's reading of Dreiser, of *Sister Carrie* and *The Financier*, is substantive, often compelling. *The Gold Standard* also makes significant additions to the present reading of American literary naturalism: Josiah Royce the novelist, *The Feud at Oakfield Creek*, Josiah Royce the statist/strategist, *War and Insurance*. There are provocative juxtapositions, suggestive openings: Michaels's discussion of the whipped slave in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs* opens up the question of the erotics of abolitionist writing as it goes in its own direction, first toward a reading of *The House of the Seven Gables*, then toward a reading of *McTeague*. There is, also, ongoing, always interesting, a cool critique of a certain left-liberal feminist reading of Stowe, Gilman, and Wharton, one that delivers, every now and then, a bodacious shot. Elizabeth Ammons's “important reading” of *The House of Mirth*, that it is anticapitalist, antipatriarchal, we soon learn, is just dead wrong. *The House of Mirth*, Michaels tells us, not only refuses to criticize the market economy, but also refuses “a feminism that would identify its own social role as an essentially critical one” (227). And there are felicities. Zerkow, Norris's grotesque Polish-Jewish goldbug junk dealer in *McTeague*, becomes a collector, is given a poetics, is brought into conversation with William James. There is, in effect, a lot going on in this study, the big project of a revisionary reading of American literary naturalism, and little projects, too.

In Michaels's strong reading of *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser gets at the dire end-of-the-century question of the “equation inevitable” better than any of his literary naturalist peers, is clearer in his logic. How does one avoid Hurstwood's course: peak, decline, expiration, that “long, slow diminution of desire,” the

horror of Hurstwoodian failure? As Michaels has it, Dreiser responds: "There are . . . two possible ways out: die young or become very rich indeed" (49). So Dreiser is committed to Carrie, to her "insatiability," gives himself over to an "unabashed and extraordinarily literal acceptance" (35) of consumer capitalism. Indeed, it is hard to keep the two distinct, Carrie and capitalism. "Feminine sexuality thus turns out to be a kind of biological equivalent to capitalism or, rather, in the slipperiness of its own biology, a figure for capitalism's ability to imagine ways out of what appear to be biologically immutable limits" (57). In Dreiser's fiction, Michaels observes, there is this summary connection: "Beautiful girls grow old and die, but beautiful girls in novels need not; rich old men, despite their riches, also die, but corporations, growing ever richer, need not" (56). Carrie and capitalism, desire and power, these terms convert in Dreiser's thought. And this is it, Michaels argues, the black nihilist core of Dreiser's meaning in *Sister Carrie*, his absolute identification with power. Dreiser's "personal hostility to capitalism," his sympathies, so tenderly expressed in his fiction, his extenuations, his excuses, which *throb* in his fiction, his Amesian reasoners, his broody narrators puzzling over the ethical question, these are just "so many failed attempts to make his work morally respectable" (58). Dreiser strives to be good, to situate that which is anticapitalist, that which is not surrender, but he can't pray a lie, Michaels argues, Dreiser wants what Carrie wants.

It is hard to come around on this reading. In Dreiser's major fiction, the sisterly girls always give in, dumbly surrender, as it were, to power, obscurely protesting: Jennie Gerhardt, Carrie Meeber, Roberta Alden. They appear, they are pretty, they confront the proposition, they enter the circumstances of its logic. *Sister Carrie*, Michaels reminds us, begins with this observation: "When a girl leaves her home at eighteen, she does one of two things. Either she falls into saving hands and becomes better, or she rapidly assumes the cosmopolitan standard of virtue and becomes worse. Of an intermediate balance, under the circumstances, there is no possibility." Either/or logic is powerfully at work in Dreiser's fiction. Men also confront an either/or proposition. Considering Hurstwood's exemplary plight, Dreiser writes: "Either he is growing stronger, healthier, wiser, as the youth approaching manhood, or he is growing weaker, older, less incisive mentally, as the man approaching old age." Sisters become better or worse. Men grow stronger or weaker. Dreiser's great "choosing" scenes dramatize, agonizingly, the grip of either/or logic: should I steal the money or

not, should I kill this girl or not. In each case, something indeterminate occurs and makes the choice problematic. Still, it would seem, for all the play of indeterminacy, this wisdom about choices generally holds in Dreiser's fiction: up against it, there are two ways out, die young, or become very rich indeed. In *An American Tragedy*, Clyde Griffiths dies young; Carrie, of course, becomes very rich. As for Dreiser, *An American Tragedy* made him rich. He took to living lavishly at expensive hotels. George Jean Nathan remembered Dreiser strolling on Broadway, dressed in "Caribbean blue shirts, vanilla ice-cream socks, and pea-green bow ties," twirling a cane, walking his Russian wolfhound. Michaels's Fitzgeraldian Dreiser is right there, unavoidable.

Yet, scandalously, the ethico-moral Dreiser, this intelligence, remains in his fiction, a speaker, not singly expressed by Bob Ames, the electrical engineer from Indianapolis. He is there in the irony of a certain social description, in the squeak of Carrie's rocking chair. He's there in all the extenuation and special pleading that takes place in his fiction. In Dreiser's world, desire-driven people are always dizzied by choices, examining their desires, considering their choices. They brood, sift, suppose. The narrator who meticulously constitutes their respective either/or proposition also broods, sifts, supposes. Michaels gives us the Howellsian reference in *Sister Carrie*, Amesian rationality, Amesian denial, as the significant instance of critique in the novel, but that is not really where it is in *Sister Carrie*. In the elaboration of motive, in the framing of contexts, in his mise-en-scène, Dreiser is as telling as Henry James. Isabel Archer (too much money) has her choices in *The Portrait of a Lady*; Carrie (very little money) has hers in *Sister Carrie*. The either/or that is soon before Carrie, her choice, to Drouet or not to Drouet, is carefully posed. "When a girl leaves home at eighteen," this establishing phrase, has in it the question, what girl and why leave home at eighteen. This girl, nameless, many, many such, "a girl," loose in the world, is not our daughter, our sister. We do not see that "home" in *Sister Carrie*, Carrie is on the train and away, but she finds it again in the unmitigated awfulness of the Hansens's Chicago working-class flat, that first stop on her way. In *An American Tragedy* we enter Roberta Alden's rural "home," its bleakness, its poorness, and meet her gaunt family. The Hansens, the Aldens, weary, washed-out, mean-spirited, poor, are in Carrie's logical analysis, as trope, as term. Young women of the rural and industrial poor who enter the labor market are soon up against it, the logic of their fate. So Carrie chooses, sells her body, discovers its price, "two

soft, green, handsome ten-dollar bills," enters the market economy. "Cooption because of talent," the Oliver Twist model, is one of the ways one becomes a bourgeois, Wallerstein tells us in *The Capitalist World-Economy*.

Desire, as Michaels has it in his reading of *Sister Carrie*, is, at last, too abstract, too categorical, in its usage. It is, like Michaels's "interest," too readily systematized, made a discursive factor, put on the binary rack. Even as Dreiser admits Carrie's desire, deliciously describes those two ten-dollar bills, deliciously describes the ecstasies of retail purchase, of owning that "peculiar little tan jacket, with large mother-of-pearl buttons," these neat little shoes, this perfect hat, "all the rage this season," as he sets up this relation, Dreiser derives Carrie's desire, prefaces it, surrounds it, specifies it. The gloomy intelligence of the rocking chair in *Sister Carrie*, the insistent voice of the Efrit in *An American Tragedy*, anticapitalist interlocution takes many forms and figures in Dreiser's fiction. Like Michaels's "truths" of the Populist/Progressive story, big, complex, the ethico-moral Dreiser is too easily abstracted in this work.

What other sets of conflict does American literary naturalism work on apart from those already cited: "pretty things and curious ones, material and representation, hard money and soft, beast and soul"? (173). The class-conflicted, class-sensitive Dreiser of *Sister Carrie*, of *Jennie Gerhardt*, of *An American Tragedy*, does not quite fit into the new procapitalist history of American literary naturalism Michaels is writing. In the grand scene of co-optation Michaels describes as the ultimate of naturalist writing, where Gilman's madwoman and Dreiser's financier are one and the same, where everything runs together: laws of nature, market practices, silver interests, gold interests, desire, power, the insatiable feminine body, capitalism, where affirmers deny and deniers affirm, something, someone, not-Ames, not-Selden, not-William Dean Howells, an indeterminate, a kind of ethico-moral Efrit, escapes the undoing of Michaels's subversive logic, escapes to tell its tale.

Work Cited

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